

“A Heart for the Hurting”

Luke 10:25-37

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When I was a freshman in college, I had to take a class called “Core 150.” It was a look at the philosophy and world views of Western Civilization, and we looked at the great question of life, the nature of God and humanity from a Jewish and Christian perspective. We looked at what great thinkers and theologians have said about life, and I noticed the question of our existence is something everybody asks sooner or later. In the end, wealth or power just isn’t enough. We want to ask, “Is this all there is?” Like the Westminster Catechism opens, “What is the chief end of man?” That is, what is the purpose of it all?

I want to look first at a question asked by an expert on the law, and then we’ll look at the parable Jesus tells in response.

At first, it might sound like a pretty good question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” But it’s not as simple as that.

The question is a contradiction in terms.

After all, what can you do to inherit anything? Not much. By definition, an inheritance isn’t something you earn, it’s something you receive. It’s a gift. You might hope for it or you might wait for it, but it is someone else’s to give. Only an heir can receive an inheritance.

It’s the same with eternal life. Eternal life is a gift you receive from God. In a sense, asking the question shows you don’t yet understand the ways of God and what Jesus has been teaching.

The lawyer is testing Jesus.

The expert in the law is a scribe, a kind of lawyer. In the tradition of the Middle East, a teacher would sit and teach (like we see Jesus do in Matthew 5:1, Luke 4:20, and John 8:2.) The students or disciples would gather around him at his feet. If someone had a question, they would stand as a sign of respect. Not only does this expert in the law stand, he addresses Jesus as “Teacher.” It’s to say, this person is worth my attention. It’s to honor Jesus.

But commentator Kenneth Bailey helps us understand that if the lawyer’s *question* contradicts his posture, the lawyer *himself* is a kind of contradiction.¹ Luke tells us his question is a test. The word “to test” is the same root used for when the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Once Jesus’ opponents determined to destroy him, they tested him like that a number of times. For the man to test Jesus suggests he is not an honest seeker. He’s trying to undermine Jesus, to trip him up, to expose him as a fraud. Luke’s Gospel says these same people sent some of their people to him hoping to catch Jesus so they could hand him over to the Roman governor. They asked Jesus,

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, pp. 33 ff.

"Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

[But Jesus] saw through their duplicity... (Luke 20:21-23)

There are lots of examples where the people out to get Jesus the same way: they ask him who a person will be married to in heaven if they had several spouses on earth; they ask what the greatest commandment is; they demand signs to prove he's who he says he is. They tried to deceive Jesus because they had corrupt hearts, and the expert in the law is doing the same thing.

The commandment at the center.

When the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus could have told him, "It's not in your power! You can't do a thing." But instead, he turns to God's Word, the law. Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer, and says "How do you read the law?"

He answers with,

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

That statement is a quote from Deuteronomy 6:5 (love God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love neighbor). It's also a summary of the whole law, and the Ten Commandments. Matthew and Mark tell us that was Jesus' summary of the commandments. It makes sense, doesn't it? The lawyer asked how to get to heaven, and Jesus points to the law of God. He must have liked that.

Now, the book of Leviticus comes before Deuteronomy in the Bible. But Jesus switches them around when he quotes them. That's important. He knows we have to love others with the perspective of love from God. It's love for God that allows us to relate to other people.

It's a standard no one can reach!

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't tell the lawyer what to do; the man tells himself. He asked a question, and the lawyer answered. Jesus simply affirms that answer:

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."
(Luke 10:28)

Which of us fully loves the Lord with everything we have? Which of us always puts the needs of other before our own? Jesus is requiring unlimited love for God and for other people. Eternal life has to do with life now. The problem is, Jesus has given an answer that no one can really do.

Later in Luke, there's a story about a rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and asks the same question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus gives points that man to scripture, too. When Jesus tells how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven,

Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:26-27)

Like Paul says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19) That changes everything.

The point of the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is that I can do nothing. It's impossible. But not for God. The lawyer doesn't see that yet. He wants a list, a quantifiable way to see he's in, so he asks a second question: "Who is my neighbor," and sets up Jesus' answer in the form of a story.

In the story's first scene a man was traveling down the 17 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road winds through canyons and drops about 3400 feet, and it's always been a dangerous place where bandits hang out. The man was attacked by robbers, beaten, stripped, and left for dead.

In the story's second scene, a priest travelled down the road and saw him. Now, the problem was, who was the man? In those days, you'd identify whether someone was from your tribe or clan by his language and by his clothes. But if the man was stripped and unconscious, how could you tell? He might not have been a Jew, but could have been a Phoenician or a Greek or an Arab. Besides, if it turned out the man was dead, the priest would have been ritually unclean for a week. The priest is *trying* to keep the law. He's trying to be good! But it keeps him from *doing* good.

It's a matter of maintaining your religious system, or reach out to someone in need by the side of the road.

In the story's third scene, a Levite, a temple assistant, traveled down the same road. He wasn't under such strict laws as the priest. Maybe he even stopped to have a closer look, to see if the man could talk. Maybe he looked ahead to watch the priest, and decided to do the same. In the end, he moved on, too, and didn't offer any help.

In the story's fourth scene, a Samaritan came along. You know who the Samaritans were, a hated people that lived north of Judea. Samaritans and Jews despised each other and would do anything to avoid each other. But the surprise of the story is that he is the one who goes to help the beaten man. The priest came, looked, and moved on. The Levite came, looked, and moved on. But the hated Samaritan came, saw, and stopped. And he does the opposite of what the bandits did; they robbed him, but the Samaritan paid for him. They left him dying, but the Samaritan left him cared for. They abandoned him, but the Samaritan promises to return to him.

Jesus brought the lawyer to the point where he could answer his own question. It seems like he kind of choked on it, and couldn't bear pronouncing the word "Samaritan," so he simply answered "the one who showed mercy." Who is my neighbor? Anyone in need. The better question is, "Who proved to be a neighbor?"

Jesus is the Good Samaritan.

The Old Testament prophet Hosea told his people to turn back to God after a time of judgment. He wrote,

"Come, let us return to the LORD.

He has torn us to pieces
but he will heal us;
he has injured us
but he will bind up our wounds.

After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us,
that we may live in his presence. (Hosea 6:1-2)

Did you notice those verbs? God will *bind us up*; he will *revive us*; he will *raise us up*; he will *come to us*.

It's what the Samaritan does: he binds up the man's wounds. He revives him. He raises him up and puts him on his donkey. He pays for him, and promises to come again one day.

The Samaritan is a kind of picture for Jesus. He goes down, just like Jesus came down from heaven for us. When he sees the wounded man, he came to him. The priest was concerned about his ritual purity, but the Samaritan knew something deeper:

And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

If God's love has a hold of you, then you reach out to share that love with others. If you know Jesus is your neighbor, then you want to be a neighbor to those whom God puts in your life.

Remember the question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The good news is you can't do a thing to get it, but Jesus Christ has done it for you. There's life beyond the one we know in this world. There's life beyond death, life where wrong is made right, where there is no longer any suffering or sorrow, where every tear is wiped from our eyes, where every mystery is revealed, where we will see his nail-scarred hands, where we shall be changed because we will see him as he is, the lamb of God and the lion of Judah.

I'm proud of how our church is reaching out in many ways, like the men who go down to serve on Wednesday nights at the City Mission in Cleveland, reaching out to some neighbors in need who aren't so very different from us. When we do that, we're being a part of God's rescue mission to the world.

So God wants you to live the Christian life, and to do that we need to become Christians. He wants us to grow to look like Jesus, and to do that we have to know him and love him, and that love itself is a gift from him. And he wants us to give that gift to someone else in his name.